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Beating Around The Bush

GEORGE BUSH, director of the CIA, gave indications last week that close, daily contact with the intelligence agency may be like a dose of LSD. It may distort one's sense of reality, or of where one is, or of what one is doing and saying.

There he was, making an impromptu talk before the American Society of Newspaper Editors in Washington. And, in a matter of fact way, he blurts out, "I've come from a secret mission to three countries."

An intelligence aide sitting nearby reportedly gave some sign of discomfort. Understandably so. If the mission was secret, why did Bush mention it? And, having done that, why did Bush refuse to discuss it further? His response: "I said it was secret and that's what that means."

Two possible explanations of Bush's circumscribed candor come quickly to mind. He may have wanted to assure the editors that he was firmly in charge of the CIA — that, in fact, he could carry off a surreptitious venture as surreptitiously as anyone. And, to be fair, keeping a secret may indeed be worthy of a high mark these days in the CIA. Bush might even consider a CIA version of the grand, old television standby "I've Got A Secret." Why, overnight, the image of the CIA

could change from one of unprincipled subterfuge to one of family entertainment.

On the other hand, Bush's feelings may have been hurt. He had set up a secret mission to three European countries to check on the morale of his agents. But no one found out about it. Did disappointment tinge his voice when he said he was surprised that news of the trip wasn't leaked to the press? Did the press think so little of him that it didn't bother to follow his movements, question his motives or cultivate snitches around his camp fire?

Bush, it must be said, has been a fine public servant. He has served as Republican Party national chairman, ambassador to the United Nations and envoy to the People's Republic of China. He faces a difficult job in preventing abuses of CIA power and, at the same time, maintaining the effectiveness of the agency's intelligence work.

BUT WE HOPE he spares the nation another secret that he has to leak because no one else will and that isn't a secret unless he's asked to comment about it. Henry Kissinger does enough of that for the whole government.